CBM; Applied Research

An Updated Version of Relational Frame Theory and How it Connects More Directly With the Concerns of Applied Behavior Analysis

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Dr. Dermot Barnes-Holmes graduated from the University of Ulster in 1985 with a B.Sc. in Psychology and in 1990 with a D.Phil. in behavior analysis. His first tenured position was in the Department of Applied Psychology at University College Cork, where he founded and led the Behavior Analysis and Cognitive Science unit. In 1999 he accepted the foundation professorship in psychology and head-of-department position at the National University of Ireland Maynooth. In 2015 he accepted a life-time senior professorship at Ghent University in Belgium. Dr. Barnes-Holmes is known internationally for the analysis of human language and cognition through the development of Relational Frame Theory with Steven C. Hayes, and its application in various psychological settings. He was the world's most prolific author in the experimental analysis of human behavior between the years 1980 and 1999. He was awarded the Don Hake Translational Research Award in 2012 by the American Psychological Association, is a past president and fellow of the Association for Contextual Behavioral Science, is a recipient of the Quad-L Lecture Award from the University of New Mexico and most recently became an Odysseus laureate of the Flemish Science Foundation and a fellow of the Association for Behavior Analysis International.

Abstract: The seminal research on equivalence relations by Sidman (1994) and colleagues, which commenced in the early 1970s, led in the mid-1980s to the development of relational frame theory (RFT; Hayes, Barnes-Holmes, & Roche, 2001). In principle, the theory aimed to provide a modern behavior-analytic account of human language and cognition, but it had a relatively limited impact on language teaching and training programs within applied behavior analysis. Although there are likely many reasons for this lack of impact, I will argue that one of the primary problems was the absence of a readily accessible systematic framework for presenting the key elements of the theory itself. Recently, however, a systematic framework has begun to evolve, which is playing a key role in up-dating RFT. Critically, this framework appears to have the potential to connect the theory more directly to the concerns of applied behavior analysts who are focused on improving the language and cognitive abilities of their client populations. This new systematization of RFT is known as the hyper-dimensional multi-level (HDML) framework. The key elements of the HDML, for the purposes of language/cognitive training, involve 20 intersections between five levels of relational development (mutual entailing; relational framing; relational networking; relating relations; and relating relational networks), which vary along four contextual dimensions (coherence; complexity; derivation; and flexibility). The lecture will describe the HDML framework as a type of ‘periodic table’ for conceptualizing language/cognitive deficits and how to approach their remediation. Relevant concrete examples of recent uses of the HDML in this regard will be provided.